

Arnold Rabbow: Black, Red and Gold: The Genesis of Germany's National Colours

[Schwarz-Rot-Gold – Die Entstehung der deutschen Nationalfarben]

Abstract: *The German national colours black-red-gold (in fact they are black-red-yellow) had not been decreed by governmental order, neither had they been the colours of a political party. They were born amidst the people as symbol of peaceful revolution and hope, being nourished by public opinion, albeit based on an error. Their origins cannot be pinpointed to any particular event or date. Knowledge about their beginnings is shrouded by legends and popular myth.*

The legend focuses on the uniform of a volunteer auxiliary military unit, the Freikorps (free corps) Lützow, which in 1813 fought in the war against Napoleon. Their uniform was black, with red piping and golden buttons. Later generations clung firmly to the opinion that one need not look any further for the first public appearance of the German colours. In fact, the three colours originated separately, more or less by chance.

When in 1818 student fraternities from all over Germany united in the Deutsche Burschenschaft ("German Fraternity") the new student association wanted to adopt the "old German colours". A student came up with the information that these had been black, red, and gold, derived from the revered coat-of-arms of Germany of old, a black eagle, armed red, on a golden shield.

The three colours which by now had evolved into a flag movement, saw a climax at the Hambach festival of 1832. The power of the democratic movement declared black-red-gold to be the colours of the German Confederation. And the first freely elected national assembly in Frankfurt created Germany's first national and merchant flag, a tricolour of black, red, and yellow, in 1848.

In 1871 King William I of Prussia, becoming German emperor, and his chancellor Bismarck sternly opposed the adoption of black-red-gold for the German Empire and chose black-white-red instead.

In 1919 the Weimar republic discarded the black-white-red flag and readopted black-red-gold as national colours. A bitter flag debate racked the young republic. No other than Otfried Neubecker, in cooperation with Erik Wolf, advocated a unifying national flag similar to the 1871 flag proposals with black-yellow-red stripes, but the atmosphere was so heated that this attempt failed. Hitler grabbed power in 1933 and finished the flag strife by proclaiming his National Socialist Workers Party's swastika flag the new flag of the Third Reich.

After the collapse of the Third Reich both German states, the Federal Republic and the German Democratic Republic, returned to the 1919 to 1933 national tricolour of black-red-yellow, the GDR added in 1959 its state emblem "Hammer und Zirkel" (hammer and compasses). In 1990 Germany was reunited under the colours of the democratic hopes of 1818 for good.

The German national colours black-red-gold (in fact, as you will have noticed, black-red-yellow, but this question will be dealt with later),

embodied in Germany's national flag, symbolizing civil liberties, democracy and national unity, were not decreed by a government order, neither had they been the colours of a political party risen to power like in so many new nations. They were born amidst the people, as the symbol of peaceful revolution and hope, and were nourished by public opinion, albeit based on an error. That is why their origins cannot be pinpointed to any particular event or date and it also explains why, even in Germany, knowledge about their beginnings is shrouded by legends and popular myth. This myth which sounds simple and reasonable, has found its way into most of the literature ¹¹ treating the colours' origin and it has become difficult to uncover the historical facts which, regrettably, suffer from the disadvantage of being complicated.



The legend focuses on the uniform of a volunteer auxiliary military unit, the *Freikorps* (free corps) *Lützow*, which in 1813 fought in the war against the French emperor Napoleon who, following his disastrous invasion of Russia in 1812, had by then passed the climax of his overlordship over all of Europe. Its military feats were of little importance, but its uniform was black, with red piping and gold buttons. The fighting

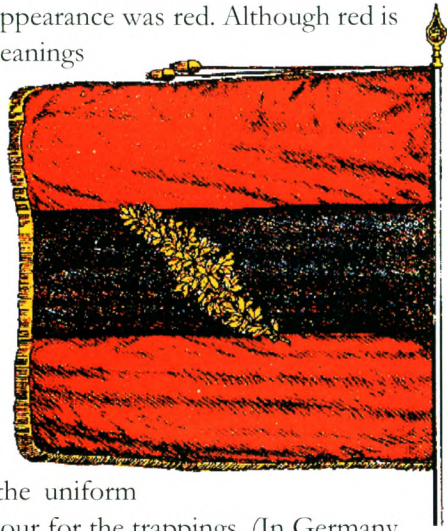
members of the corps did not associate any particular meaning with this colour trio, but later generations did, and clung firmly to the opinion that one need not look any further for the first public appearance of the German colours.

The historical truth, however, is by no means that simple. In fact, the three colours originated separately, more or less by chance. The principal colour of the *Freikorps* was black, pure and simple. Since the volunteers at first wore their civilian clothes, dying them black was the

simplest way of making them look like a uniform. But it is well to remember that black, the colour of death, appropriate for a body of men prepared to sacrifice their lives for the freedom of their people, had also a transcendent meaning, pointing to a new kind of equality. The Lützow volunteers, unlike the regular armies of the German states of the time, were not raised in their particular states (or forcibly recruited in neighbouring territories), but came from all over Germany, in fact constituting the first national military body of that nature. The volunteers were well aware of this uniqueness, and they cherished the idea that they were equals, regardless of their different social backgrounds (students, middle class sons, craftsmen). Their black garment ^[2] not only made them look alike but also feel as equals. King Frederick William III of Prussia, a leading military figure in the coalition against Napoleon, sensed the revolutionary and democratic undertones in the minds of the young auxiliaries, about which, not surprisingly, he felt uneasy, but he accepted Major von Lützow's proposal to raise a body of men to be employed in a sort of guerrilla warfare behind enemy lines. Although he reluctantly agreed to affiliate it with the regular Prussian army, he refused to grant this more or less irregular unit a military standard. In fact, a group of Berlin women had made such a standard for the young volunteers with their romantic touch, but the king disapproved of it because it differed from the traditional pattern of Prussian regimental standards (of which the German Historical Museum still owns the most comprehensive collection). Unfortunately, we do not know what this standard, which has not survived, looked like. One of the leaders of German resistance of the time, Friedrich Ludwig Jahn, (called the "Turnvater" ["Exercise Dad"] due to his propagating athletics as pre-military training), later claimed to have invented the black-red-gold colours and insisted that the lost standard had embodied just those colours. However, no facts exist to support his claim, and anyway it is rather unlikely because neither the Lützow volunteers nor their female admirers dreamed as yet of any "German colours".

The second colour in order of appearance was red. Although red is the colour more loaded with meanings

than any other colour, it had no special meaning at all to the Lützow volunteers. It was only added to their black uniform in a very minor way, as piping, because the Prussian king wanted to make their uniform conform at least a bit with the regular army uniforms which in those days contained generally two colours, the main colour for the uniform



jacket and a different minor colour for the trappings. (In Germany, a military uniform has always been called “der bunte Rock” which literally translates as “the colourful garment” but actually means “bi-coloured garment”.)

The third colour, gold, the colour of the uniform buttons, (of course, not real gold, but brass or a similar metal) came about as a simple necessity. No particular importance let alone special symbolic meaning was associated with the buttons of uniforms.

Of these three colours which came into view quite independently from each other, the first two did indeed gain a symbolic meaning after the liberation war had ended with Napoleon’s final defeat at Waterloo. A student association, the “Jenaer Burschenschaft “ (Jena fraternity, named after the university town), with several former Lützow volunteers among its members, adopted black and red (or red and black respectively) as their fraternity colours in 1815. Serious young men, in fact veterans, that they were, they associated them with their fraternity’s credo: “Keeping in mind that the joys of youth should not let forget us life’s seriousness, we chose red and black for our banner”. They carried a simple flag of red over black stripes with no other symbols on it. They regarded themselves as a kind of reserve military unit in case peace should be endangered by a return of Napoleon (he had, in fact,

escaped from exile once before and had to be defeated a second time by the coalition powers). Accordingly they wore a student garment which they called "Waffenrock" (a synonym for a military coat). This "Waffenrock", inspired by the Lützow uniform, consisted of a black coat with red facings. To these were added yellow braid for decorative purposes. Women and maidens of Jena stitched a flag for the Burschenschaft, this time red-black-red horizontal stripes with golden tassels and a golden branch of oak leaves in the centre. Again, no special symbolic connotation was intended, the Burschenschaft colours still being black and red only, with the gold ornaments simply added as embellishments. This flag, which has become a national icon, is preserved at the Jena civic museum with an early replica kept at Wartburg castle, the place where students convened to prepare an all-German student association in 1817.

This Burschenschaft flag, although its colours were not as yet regarded as the German national colours, was in later years looked upon as the alleged original model of them.

When in 1818 student fraternities from all over Germany united to form the Deutsche Burschenschaft ("German Fraternity") under the leadership of the Jena fraternity they wanted to adopt common colours. For a moment, the Prussian colours black and white, referred to as "colours of seriousness and purity", were discussed because Prussia had furnished the largest part of the military coalition against Napoleon. However, since the Prussian monarchy turned out to be not the avatar of a democratic unification of Germany but quite contrary a stronghold of the old absolutist regime and of suppression of the democratic movement, this idea was discarded.

Instead, the new student association wanted to adopt the "old German colours". However, they were unsure what these had looked like. Finally, a student named Wesselhöft, a member of the Jena fraternity, came up with the information that the old German colours had been black, red, and gold, derived from the revered coat of arms of Germany of old, a black eagle, armed red, on a golden shield. It is unclear where Wesselhöft gathered this information, be it from professors of the university of Jena or from Turnvater Jahn, or whether he purposely

advocated these colours because he was familiar with the banner of the Jena fraternity, thus adding to the glory of the “Urburschenschaft” (prime fraternity) and forever uniting it with the national colours. Be that as it may, the idea caught on immediately because public opinion widely supported it, the alleged link with the German coat of arms looking so obvious.

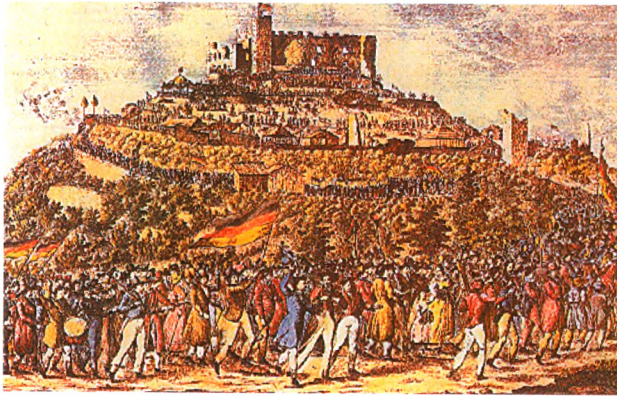


However, public opinion as well as history experts of the time were in error. The old Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation which had collapsed in 1806 under Napoleon’s onslaught, had never known “German”,

let alone national colours. The very notion of national colours had only emerged with the French Revolution of 1789, and the old German Empire, still functioning along medieval feudal lines, had been no nation state anyway, but a rather loose confederation of many dozens of more or less independent states. Its arms had in fact been the black eagle, sometimes armed red, on a gold field, but since the 15th century had changed to a double eagle which in later years had been armed gold more often than red. Only black and gold were thus regarded as imperial colours, but never as national colours. Instead they were associated with the Hapsburg emperors, these having styled themselves emperors of Austria shortly before the demise of the Holy Roman Empire, and thus black and gold were not suited to serve as national colours of a resurrected German monarchy.



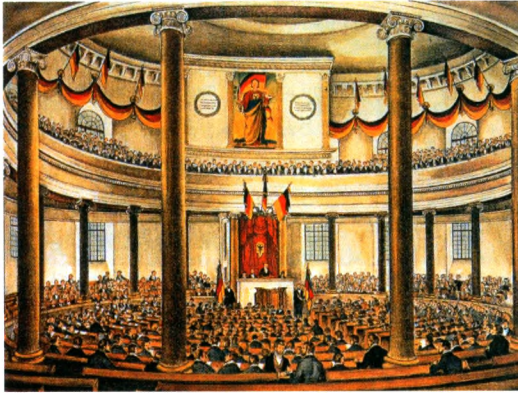
But, as often happens in history, it is not the facts that unfold factual power, but what public opinion believes to be the facts. Accordingly, the notion of the German national colours, although based on an erroneous conception, spread among the population with amazing impetus. The hopes of doing away with the more than 30 still existing princely states with their mostly reactionary rulers and of building a new democratic Germany along the lines of a parliamentary monarchy (the idea of a republic did not yet enjoy widespread support) focused on black-red-gold. Not surprisingly these were fiercely opposed by



the ruling kings, granddukes, dukes, and princes, who although loosely united in a German Confederation, ruled their states as sovereign monarchs.

They hated the

German colours, especially the tricolour flag, all the more because their states' colours usually consisted of just two colours, whereas the three colour arrangement had gained a revolutionary reputation, not unjustified, because the primary colour trio red, white, and blue (or blue, white, and red) had originated in wars of revolution and liberation, with the Netherlands preceding, already in the 16th century, the flag colours of the United States of America and the French tricolour. The student fraternities and black-red-gold were outlawed in 1819; whoever dared to display them, was sent to jail. Nevertheless popular "Farbenlieder" (colour songs) were composed and published and sung at secret meetings. The three colours which by now had evolved into a flag movement, saw a climax at the Hambach festival of 1832, where thousands of demonstrators waved black-red-yellow flags on their march to an ancient castle on a mountain.



In the end the ruling princes realized they could not win the battle against the ever more popular national colours, and they made a tactical move aimed at sapping the power of the democratic movement by declaring black-red-gold to be the colours of the German Confederation. Almost simultaneously the first freely elected national assembly in Frankfurt created Germany's first national and merchant flag, a tricolour of black, red, and yellow, in 1848 [3]. A wave of revolutionary manifestations swept the capitals of the states, including Berlin and Vienna. However, since the monarchs kept hold of their armed forces though paying lip service to German unity, the revolution was unsuccessful, and the German tricolour was hauled down from the Confederation building in Frankfurt in 1852. Still, black-red-gold lingered on, though unofficially, in southern Germany.



Somewhat of a setback to the visual impact of the flag was the arrangement of the stripes which, in fact, was unheraldic. The violation of the sound heraldic principle that colours (i.e. black, blue, green, or red) should be set against "metals" (white and yellow or silver and gold respectively), made the flag, with its black stripe on top followed by the red central stripe, look a bit sombre. The explanation of the unusual arrangement can be found in the early genesis of black-red-gold which started with black and red, with gold only added later as the last colour.



Accordingly, the colours were at first and for some years to come, referred to as “black, red, a n d gold”. Already in 1848 it was realized that the colours should be rearranged with the yellow stripe in the middle which would have enhanced he flag’s visibility ^[4]. However, black-yellow-red had in the meantime been adopted by Belgium, and apart from that, the black-red-gold flag had become the symbol of democracy for which so many sacrifices had been made. Therefore neither the people nor their representatives in the National Assembly wanted to change it.

The rearrangement of the colours was again advocated by heraldry experts in 1871, when the new unified German state looked for a flag. King William I of Prussia, soon to become German emperor, and his chancellor Bismarck who both resented the revolutionary tradition of German democracy’s flag, sternly opposed the re-adoption of black-red-gold ^[5] and chose black-white-red instead, a combination of Prussia’s black and white with the red and white of the Hanseatic ports (note that black-white-red had already been adopted by the Prussian-dominated North German Confederation in 1867). The heraldists’ proposal to alter the German flag to black-yellow-red (with horizontal stripes, not vertical, as in Belgium) might have not only produced a prettier flag but at the same time reconciled the democratic tradition with the new order of the nascent German Empire. But the experts’ sound advice went unheeded.

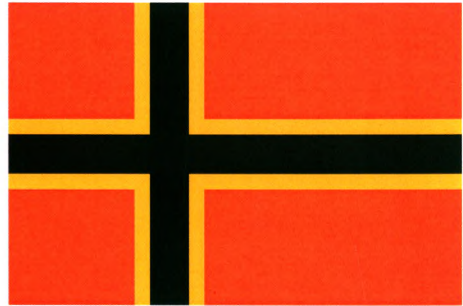
The question surfaced again half a century later, when in 1919 the Weimar republic discarded the black-white-red flag ^[6] - which, however, had grown dear to the hearts of many during the 47 years of the monarchy and under which thousands had died in World War I. Instead, the republic readopted black-red-gold as national colours. That started the bitter flag debate that racked the young republic ^[7]. No other

than Ottfried Neubecker, in cooperation with Erik Wolf, advocated a unifying national flag similar to the 1871 flag proposals with black-yellow-red stripes which could have reconciled the warring political factions because it retained the republican colours but arranged them in the order of the imperial black-white-red flag ¹⁸. But the atmosphere was so heated that this attempt to end the ruinous flag debate by a compromise failed, too.

When Hitler, who as a WWI veteran was a supporter of black-white-red and always derided black-red-gold as the symbol of the “System” (i.e. parliamentary rule) to be overcome, grabbed power in 1933, he finished the flag strife by proclaiming his National Socialist Workers Party’s swastika flag the new flag of the Third Reich. For two years he tolerated the black-white-red flag as second national flag, but when state president von Hindenburg had died in 1934, the imperial tricolour was done away with; black, white and red were incorporated in the Swastika flag anyway.

One last effort to rearrange the national colours was made in 1944 by the German resistance movement in which army officers played a major role ¹⁹. Although their

plot to kill Hitler and to finish National Socialist rule tragically failed in the end, they had given serious thought to what kind of flag a liberated Germany should fly after the overthrow of Hitler’s dictatorship with its Swastika flag. However, they



did not want to reopen the ruinous flag battle of the pre-Nazi years, and so they designed a flag following the Scandinavian model with a black cross, edged gold, on a red field. This flag model had a certain similarity to the basic model of the German ensign because the rebels wanted to secure the assistance of the armed forces in order to carry the day. However, the attempt at Hitler’s life on 20th July 1944 failed, and the rebels were hanged.

After the collapse of the Third Reich both German states, the Federal Republic and the German Democratic Republic, returned to the 1919 to 1933 national tricolour of black-red-yellow. Konrad Adenauer, later to become the first chancellor of the Federal Republic, tried to introduce the 1944 cross flag into the discussion, but since many of the representatives in the constitutional assembly of 1948 had already been active in the Weimar republic, the simple tricolour was readopted without much discussion. Likewise, the GDR at first used the same tricolour, only to add the Soviet style state emblem “Hammer und Zirkel” (hammer and compasses) in 1959 in order not to be mistaken for the other German republic. Nevertheless, although in the GDR the plain red flag of Socialism/Communism usually accompanied the national flag as kind of a second state flag, the national tricolour was never discarded, and its colours appeared even in the state arms (on the wreath surrounding the central device). When in 1989 the Soviets let go of their German satellite state, the Communist regime collapsed immediately with reunification following in 1990. Since the plain tricolour had already been displayed at mass demonstrations against the faltering Communist regime, no flag debate ensued ^[10], and Germany



was reunited as a free country under the colours of democratic hopes of 1818 for good.

One final note on the actual colours. Germans never cared about a fact that today sometimes irritates vexillologists and publishers of flag charts: In real life the black-red-gold colours, when displayed as the national flag, do not show nor did they ever show a true metal golden stripe, but a yellow one. To the German public this has always been quite

natural and nobody ever took note of the colour difference. In fact, there is none. Public opinion has always been convinced that black-red-gold had been the “old” German colours, and since these were derived from a heraldic device, the eagle shield, it went without saying that the

golden shield could be represented by a yellow tincture, because in heraldry the so-called metals (or and argent in heraldic blazonry) can be substituted by yellow and white in everyday practice. Since a gold textile fabric of satisfying quality let alone suitable for flags supposed to fly could not be manufactured, the yellow stripe was never questioned. It had become even more firmly rooted in the public's mind since poets and songwriters always used the term black-red-gold when they hailed the national colours, even when they did not explicitly refer to flags. To sum it up: Germany's national colours are, and always have been, black-red-yellow, but they have always been called black-red-gold.



Endnotes:

1. Still best reads: Egmont Zechlin: SchwarzRotGold und SchwarzWeißRot in Geschichte und Gegenwart, Berlin 1926; Paul Wentzcke: Die deutschen Farben, Heidelberg 1927, new ed. 1955; Veit Valentin/Ottfried Neubecker: Die deutschen Farben, Leipzig 1928.
2. A precedent had been set by the "black duke" Frederick William of Brunswick, who in 1809 led a body of 1500 men, called the "black band", with black garments and blue pipings, through occupied Germany, fighting Napoleon's allies until he reached England. The duke was killed in battle near Waterloo in 1815.
3. Law of 31st July 1848, promulgated 12th November 1848 (Reichs-Gesetz-Blatt. 5tes Stück, Frankfurt a.M., 13th November 1848).
4. F. W. Ghillany/Carl Heideloff: Der deutsche Adler und die deutschen Farben, Stuttgart 1848.
5. Another reason was that in the Austrian-Prussian war of 1866 over predominance in the German Confederation Austria had used black-red-gold armbands for the allied troops (because black-red-gold had not yet been formally abolished by the Confederation).
6. It was retained, though, as merchant flag, with a small black-red-yellow canton.
7. See Arnold Rabbow: Symbole der Bundesrepublik Deutschland und des Landes Niedersachsen, Hannover 1980, pp. 27-35.
8. Ottfried Neubecker/Erik Wolf: Die Reichseinheitsflagge, Heidelberg 1926.
9. See Arnold Rabbow: A Flag Against Hitler: The 1944 National Flag Proposal of the German Resistance Movement, in: The Flag Bulletin, Nr. 100 (Ottfried Neubecker Festschrift), May-August 1983, pp. 167-181.
10. During the last days of the GDR in 1990, a citizen committee (Runder Tisch) had advocated a black-red-yellow flag with a white disk containing the "swords to ploughshares" symbol. It became obsolete, though, when German reunification was achieved under the plain black-red-yellow flag..

Illustrations:

1. Reconnaissance squad of the Lützow Free Corps (1815 painting)
2. Flag of the Jena student fraternity 1816
3. Germany's national colours: Born in 1818, declared national flag in 1848, again in 1919 and 1949
4. The oldest depiction in colours of the German coat of arms: black eagle, not yet armed red, on a golden shield (in Brunswick cathedral, 1209/1213)
5. The Hambach festival in 1832
6. The first German parliament convening in the Paulskirche in Frankfurt/M. (1848)
7. Barricade fights in Berlin 1848
8. 1848/1871/1926 compromise proposal for a new German national flag: black-gold(yellow)-red
9. 1944 flag project of the German resistance movement: black cross, fimbriated yellow, on red (after an original drawing by Ernst Wirmser, surviving brother of the proposal's author, Josef Wirmser, sentenced to death in 1944)
10. Germany's present day coat of arms: black eagle, armed red, on a golden shield (arms of the Weimar Republic 1919, of the Federal Republic 1950, of reunified Germany 1990)

About the author



Arnold Rabbow was born 1936 in Berlin. Interested in flags since seeing 1943 a flag-plate (of all nations) in a department store, later intensified by having the album „Historical Flags“ by Ottfried Neubecker. After studies at the university 1966 doctorate on a subject dealing with emblems, signs and colours including coats of arms and flags. ("Visuelle Symbole als Erscheinung der nicht-verbalen Publizistik" [Visual symbols in non-verbal mass communications]). Member of DGF, NAVA, Flag Institute, SEV, NVvV, SGFF and others. Books: dtv-Lexikon politischer Symbole A-Z / Dizionario dei simboli politici; Symbols of the Federal Republic of Germany and the Bundesland Niedersachsen; German coats-of-arms and flags - symbols in the democratic state; Brunswick armorial (2nd ed.)(with municipal flags) and others.

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